

A woman with curly hair, wearing a black top and a blue feathered skirt, is laughing joyfully in a desert landscape under a clear blue sky. She is wearing large blue earrings and a blue pom-pom. The background shows a desert with some green bushes and a wooden fence. The text is overlaid on the image in three blue banners.

BURLESQUE

YOGA

SEX AND LOVE

*A memoir of life
under the Albuquerque sun*

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Sticky Nipples



I've managed to stick the tape to itself, my fingers, and the floor; everywhere but to the backs of the pasties. It's a mess. Strands of one of the tassels are now stuck to the tape and I'm struggling to free them. I feel like I'm back in my Bluebird Campfire girl group, trying to glue a little, pink felt skirt to a wooden clothespin to make a doll. Then and now, my adhesive is adhering in all the wrong places and everyone else has finished. The difference is that this evening, instead of being with a group of middle school girls in blue vests, I'm with a group of half-naked women. They have all successfully applied their pasties over their nipples and are busy twirling, while the instructor, Miss Indigo Blue, makes her way over to give me a hand. I'm hoping that my upturned smiling face masks my deep internal sigh of frustration.

Her expert hands take the tiny pasties from my sticky paws. She looks at me and I say "I'm new," hoping this explains everything. She smiles quite sweetly and then recuts and expertly affixes the tape, showing me best practices on application. Holly Rebelle, the leader of Burlesque Noir—the troupe that sponsored this class in tassel twirling, and the troupe I would like to join—gives me some tips on the next step: applying the pasties to my nipples. I hold the bottom edge of the pastie right below the areola, then scoop up my breast and press the top of the pastie farther up, giving a little lift. I hold the pastie tight to my squishy breast, then let go. It stays, and I let out the breath I hadn't realized I was holding. Left pastie applied. Now on to the task of adhering the right one so it is even with the left.

Pasties are a burlesque staple and have been used since the 1920s

to remain in compliance with the law, so that a performer could strip without being “topless.” Carrie Finnell, who began her career with the Zigfield Follies in 1916, is credited with adding tassels to pasties, creating “tassel twirling.” Carrie was described as “this nice lady who looked every bit like your mom,” but who would then break out into a striptease. She began her life as a gym teacher in Kentucky, developing her pectoral muscles to the point that she could move her breasts individually in any direction. In 1957 Cabaret Magazine reported her saying “We’ve all got ‘em, but I make mine work for me. What do you do with yours?” In one of her pastie-twirling performances, she mimicked a twin engine propeller plane. An observer described her performance:

. . . faster and faster the (first tassel) would spin while its fellow tassel lay limp and neglected on the other bosom. Then the other tassel would come to life. It would start spinning slowly, while the first tassel was at full speed. Carrie looked like a twin engine bomber.¹

I don’t think I will ever be able to move my breasts independently, even with my belly dance-trained pectoral muscles. But at least I can get the tassels to twirl.

Miss Indigo Blue has a natural honesty and groundedness I did not expect in a woman who carries the title of the 2011 Reigning Queen of Burlesque and is headmistress of her Seattle-based burlesque academy.² Her dark hair frames creamy skin, and slender limbs speak to her years as a dancer. But her most beguiling quality is her smile and disarmingly earthy humor.

Along with Holly, the other ladies from Burlesque Noir in attendance are Mary Jane Monroe, General Blackery and Delicia Dollcurls. I find myself joining them in their complete unselfconsciousness about being topless, and I am surprised at how easy that is. However, my self-consciousness about being unable to apply the pastie by myself sits over me like a cloak.

We learn twirling techniques and, thanks to my background in

belly dance, I'm able to isolate my shoulder and chest muscles and can actually twirl pretty well. The cloak of self-consciousness begins to lift a bit and I laugh. This is fun. I look around and the other women are laughing too; we are having a great time together. Someone, I think Mary Jane Monroe, tries lying on her back to twirl and it works. I try it too and, surprisingly, the tassels twirl heartily in no time. A warm feeling of pride burbles up: I have a move.

It is one thing to sit with a group of women and be half or even fully naked. This happens all the time in a spa, at a BNL (a clothing swap, aptly named a “bare naked ladies party”) or the locker room at yoga. I have a niggling feeling deep in my gut that this will be more challenging than changing clothes in the locker room.



The global recession that began in 2007 radically changed my life. As an online adjunct faculty member at a college, my per-class student limit rose (first from 25 to 30, then to 35), full-time faculty position openings were frozen, and classes were cut. My chances of finding full-time employment fizzled. The company that my husband, Ben, worked for struggled. Finally, in January of 2011, he was furloughed indefinitely and we both found ourselves looking for new employment. Hood River, the small Oregon town on the banks of the Columbia River that we called home, was picturesque beyond belief but offered few job openings, so we both began looking at any opportunities anywhere. By mid-spring, Ben was offered an interview by a company in Albuquerque.

Spring in Oregon is a wet, dreary affair. In the Columbia River Gorge, the early months of the year are often completely socked in, with a low ceiling of white clouds lying heavily in the sky, reducing the sun to a dim glow. But on the first day of March 2011, as we stepped outside the doors of the Albuquerque airport (aptly named Sunport), the sun was dazzling. I tried to remember if I even owned a pair of sunglasses. I would certainly need them in Albuquerque.

After his interview, Ben picked me up at the hotel and we decided

to see the city and find some lunch. We cruised down Central Avenue, aka historic Route 66. Route 66 is part of the history and culture of Albuquerque. One of the first highways of the US highway system, it originally ran from Chicago to Los Angeles, through Kansas, Oklahoma, Texas, New Mexico and Arizona. It was established in the late 1920s and, for the next few decades, motels, restaurants, shops and service stations bloomed like wildflowers on either side. The mom-and-pop ventures used catchy names or architecture to attract roadsters to their places of business, the most unforgettable being the Wigwam Hotel near Flagstaff, Arizona, which featured rooms built in the shape of tipis.

We stopped for lunch at Kelly's, a brew pub housed in a repurposed historic building originally built in 1939 as a Ford dealership and service station serving the Route 66 motor craze. When it was built, it was considered one of the most modern structures in the west. Sitting outside on the spacious patio next to an antique Texaco gas pump, munching on a buffalo burger and sweet potato fries, quaffing a beer, soaking in bright sun, Ben and I fell under the spell of the Land of Enchantment.

Fortunately, Ben was offered the job and we found the perfect adobe-style house within walking distance of Kelly's. After a couple of weeks, we were in a truck moving our essentials, including our menagerie of five cats (Chloe, Rachel, Castor, Pollux, and Romeo) and one red-tail boa constrictor (Asherah), to our new home.

A month before moving to Albuquerque, I took my first burlesque class. After years of belly dance, I wanted to branch out and try a new art form. I had seen the movie *Burlesque* with Cher and Christina Aguilera, and I thought that point of burlesque was basically to add a little "heat," a dash of seduction and a few suggestive moves to a dance. After a few classes we learned a complete chair routine, chocked full of seductive arched backs, legs spread wide, and hands gliding up our thighs. At the end of class, the instructor announced that the next week we would add clothing removal, specifically learning to take off our bras. I was stunned. I didn't know if I could do that in front of people, let alone on a stage.

Our moving schedule prevented me from attending the next class, but at least I had learned some of the basic movements and concepts of burlesque. Once established in Albuquerque, I located a hot yoga studio near our house and found a home belly dancing with a local troupe lead by a wonderful woman named Jennifer. But my real interest was in continuing with burlesque. In late April, I was flipping through the local paper and discovered a burlesque show. I managed to talk Ben into attending (it wasn't hard, actually). The headliners were Trixie Little and The Evil Hate Monkey, an internationally recognized acrobatic striptease duet then based in Baltimore. ³

The performances that evening embraced a dizzying array of styles, including classic striptease, performance art, comedy sketch, satire and a wide variety of dance styles. Trixie and Monkey, both circus-trained, performed a duet to "Total Eclipse of the Heart" incorporating acrobalance poses, perfect comedic timing and melodramatic acting as they pulled off each other's clothes, hitting all of the beats and every refrain of "turn around" in this truly overwrought song. One of the most memorable moments was when Monkey, who is a little shorter than Trixie, jumped up and straddled her waist, and then they each leaned backward into a balance. Trixie then melted into a back bend while Monkey straddled her and did a bump and grind; the audience howled as he straddled her face. Still holding her backbend as Monkey walked behind her to face the crowd, Trixie supported his entire body weight as he leaned over her and wrapped his arms around her torso, lifting himself into an arm stand. Trixie wore high heels throughout the entire performance and never even quaked. I was breathless.

Continuing with the humorous streak of burlesque, local performer General Blackery presented an act to Rick James' song "Mary Jane," which involved pulling a bag of white powder out from between her legs, then tossing that in favor of a joint she artfully extracted from her bra and then seductively smothering a brownie (also stashed in her bra) on her face. But for me, the hook of the evening was a campy and fun hula-girl number by a local troupe, Burlesque Noir. They were smart, amusing and sexy. Ben and I were instant burlesque fans, and I wanted to

join the troupe, so I signed up for the mailing list and received notice of a class in July on twirling pasties.

Sitting here on the day before my forty-eighth birthday in a class with Miss Indigo Blue, the Reigning Queen of Burlesque, and the ladies of Burlesque Noir, I look down at the first pair of pasties covering my nipples. I can't help but smile with satisfaction that they twirl.



On the Saturday after the tassel twirling class, Ben and I head over to Santa Fe for the International Folk Art Market, a colorful open-air affair with hundreds of artisans from all over the world. I am particularly drawn to the tribal style Tuareg jewelry (Ben discreetly purchases a piece I admired for my birthday) and the Mexican silver filigree earrings. We promise ourselves that some year we will come home with one of the rugs from the Uzbekistan weavers.

After a day of unpacking and settling in to our new home, Sunday night finds us needing a night out. We decide to check out the rooftop bar of the Parque Central Hotel, with its unparalleled views of the Albuquerque skyline. Originally a hospital and later a psychiatric facility, this Italianate structure retains its original grace with columns and tilework edging the tall windows. Curled into the comfy outdoor sofa, we wait for sunset, which at this time of year starts a little after 8 o'clock. Sipping expensive cocktails while watching the sun disappear on the horizon, sliding below the curve of the earth, we bask in the cooling night air of twilight and our shared bliss.